

Epistemology and explicitation in a selection of the prose and poetry of jonathan...

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I want to outline in this essay some of the ways in which Swift's texts – in particular the shorter prose works and the poetry concerned with the female body – take up and make explicit contradictory philosophical positions. Much time and critical effort has been spent attempting to trace some unifying philosophical thread through the maze created by these and other of Swift's writings, when such a thread may be elusive to the point of vanishing altogether. 1 It seems possible that one cause of this critical need to establish consistency in Swift is the influence of Postmodernist thought, which tends to cause a conditioned response to eighteenth century literary works in which the instinctive move is to look for that which totalizes, compartmentalizes, reveals a master narrative or supplies a clearly defined linear teleology. If, however, this kind of pre-imagined consistency proves unavailable, the critic is left with the notion of a multi-vocal, polychromatic Swift which should not, perhaps, be so surprising as there seems nothing alien to the intellectual trends of early-eighteenth century England in Swift's assumption of positions that appear radically opposed to one another. Periods of transition necessarily involve the existence of contradictory positions in constellation often within the work of a single writer or thinker. Even Sir Isaac Newton, the greatest of all icons of Enlightenment rationality, can be represented in such a way: “ Newton was a Janus figure, emblematic of the new, rationalist, scientific and secular future, yet also using his mathematical skills for abstruse astrological and biblical calculations.” (Corfield, 11). Clearly any attempt to attribute a definitive philosophical position to Swift is fraught with difficulty. 2 Not only must the reader attempt to penetrate multiple levels of irony at a micro-level, but at a macro-level the

fact that Swift was an Anglican clergyman complicates any philosophical interpretation. The origins of the debates on this issue are contemporaneous with the publication of the texts themselves (William Wotton's observations, for example), and criticism up to the end of the nineteenth century continued, predominately, to insist on an irreligious Swift an approach that survived into the twentieth century: "no defence of Swift's fundamental religious orthodoxy can stand the test of such writings. He is a sceptical humanist who again and again tilts at Christian belief". (Wilson Knight, on "The Tale of a Tub", 124). This strain of criticism has been long overtaken, however, by the notion that throughout Swift's texts there is an obvious tendency towards a defense of, and apology for, the Anglican Church: for Swift "the world can only be properly interpreted in a context of moral truth enforced by divine authority". (Williams, 137). Or: "That Swift inherited, and loyally struggled for, a traditional Anglican solution...can be seen demonstrably in his life." (Hall, 43). As an illustration of the complications attending any study of Swift, it would be possible to make the case that the time has now arrived for an analysis that seeks to resurrect Swift as "a sceptical humanist". Such an approach put here in a very reductive form might begin from the position that critics baffled by the heterogeneous nature and multiplicity of works like "The Tale of a Tub" have a tendency to return to the sermons, and the other works of Swift-the-churchman, and finding there only Anglican orthodoxy proclaim Swift a pillar of the church. The fact remains, however, that the richness, variety, and multiplicity of meanings contained in works like Gulliver's Travels or "The Tale of a Tub" continue to indicate, at the very least, a lack of absolute conviction in the

teachings of the Anglican Church. Such arguments begin to uncover the potential complexities and paradoxes in which an analysis of Swift's writings can enmesh the critic seeking to "smoak out" (Norton, 446) a biographically consistent interpretation, and are precisely the kind of hermeneutics I wish to avoid. Attempts, therefore, to ascertain what Swift "actually thought" are set aside here; what matters for my purposes in this essay is the philosophical positions Swift's texts assume and the resulting explicitation and unraveling of complex epistemological positions. An example of such a position, easily overlooked in Swift, is empiricism used nearly always in the texts in juxtaposition with epistemologies antagonistic to it. The fable of the bee and the spider in "The Battel of the Books" offers a particularly strong instance, in which the text uses an empirical epistemology to attack individual human reason: 3Whether is the nobler Being of the two, That which by a lazy Contemplation of four Inches round; by an over-weening Pride, which feeding and engendering on it self, turns all into Excrement and Venom; producing nothing at last, but Fly-bane and a Cobweb: Or That, which, by an universal Range, with long Search, much Study, true Judgment, and Distinction of Things, brings home Honey and Wax. (Norton, 383). Or, in a similar vein, concerned only for that which is within, the spider is represented as "furnisht with a Native Stock within my self. This large Castle (to shew my Improvements in the Mathematicks) is all built with my own Hands, and the Materials extracted altogether out of my own person." (Norton, 383). And, perhaps most barbed of all, the spider is portrayed as "wisely gathering Causes from Events, (for they knew each other by Sight)". (Norton, 382). Similarly the textually privileged "ancient", Aesop, is given

the empirical position: “ was ever any thing so Modern as the Spider in his Air, his turns, and his Paradoxes?”, “ nothing but Dirt spun out of your own Entrails (the guts of Modern Brains)”, and, “ whatever we have got, has been by infinite Labor, and search, and ranging thro’ every Corner of Nature”. (Norton, 384). The text uses a sophisticated empirical position to challenge individual human reason with apparent disregard for empiricism’s potential to undermine metaphysics generally. By appearing to embrace an essentially empirical epistemology it is at least arguable that “ The Battel of the Books” opens a space for further critiques along lines philosophically similar to its own. The unraveling of previously implicit positions thus becomes a real possibility. There are, of course, differing opinions on the philosophical positioning in “ The Battel of the Books”. An example is the view of Warren Montag who seeks to isolate the reasons why thinkers like Hobbes, Gassendi, and, most notably, Descartes, should be targets for Swift. Montag, in reflecting on the fable of the bee and the spider, argues that “ Swift believed that the community of learning with its archive of eternally valid works was prior to the individual. The community and its generality and commonality was a bulwark against the peculiar weaknesses of an individual thinker.” (57). Evidently, on these grounds, the Swift posited by Montag could not tolerate a thinker like Descartes who sought to demolish these pillars of knowledge and begin anew. For Montag, Swift’s antagonism towards the spider’s valorization of innate reason is a result of Swift’s insistence on dismissing an epistemology that is produced by the individual alone; an epistemology that fails to offer due recognition to the accretions of a centuries-old communality of knowledge. Clearly this leads to a dichotomy in

the fable of the bee and the spider, as empiricism is an epistemology that defines itself by its refusal of a priori knowledge and that refers, always, for its sources of knowledge to the senses and experience of the individual; the notion of a transcendent and “eternally valid work” is diametrically opposed to such a position. If we accept both Montag’s point concerning the communality of knowledge (detached, of course, from Swift the person) and mine, concerning empiricism, there emerges an unresolvable philosophical paradox in Swift’s use of the fable. Such paradoxes demand, and have received, explicitation. Whether or not it was simply convenient for Swift to expose innate reason to the strictures of empiricism, and to make, simultaneously, the point concerning the communality of knowledge is hard to establish. What is certain, however, is that the effect has been to stimulate vigorous debate. Unresolvable contradictions within the same critique lead to potentially endless reverberations of meaning and interpretation. Another area of Swift’s texts in which empiricism is particularly evident is in the poems that discuss the bodies and bodily functions of women: “The Lady’s Dressing Room”, “A Beautiful Young Nymph Going to Bed”, “Strephon and Chloe” and “Cassinus and Peter”. Here the texts expose the idealistic notions of Petrarchan love poetry to truth claims available from sense impressions. Shit (empirical truth), for example, is brought into direct opposition to the flawless woman (glorification of an empirically insupportable idea). It is not she who shits who is mocked, but he who cannot face the empirical realities of shitting. Bodily realities are posited as the antithesis of the standard, and highly abstracted, figurations of the classic romance: the odours of “sour, unsavoury, streams” (“The Lady’s

Dressing Room”, Norton, 536), the sight of “ handkerchiefs...All varnished o’er with Snuff and Snot” (536) and Caelia’s shit, (“ Cassinus and Peter”, Norton, 550) are set against “ Pigeons billing”, “ Hymen with a flaming torch” and “ infant Loves with purple wings”. (“ Strephon and Chloe”, Norton, 541). The truth of the admonition to Strephon that “ fine Ideas vanish fast,/While all the gross and filthy last” (Norton, 545) is inescapable within the context of the poem. The poetry takes the satire on “ romantic-Platonic love” (Norman. O. Brown, Norton, 617) a stage further in its presentation of the itemization and separation of the clothing and the bodily residues of the female as the empirical analogue of the idealizing central metaphor of the blazon, which dismembers the love object behind an obscuring screen of spirituality. Everything that is presented as spiritual in Petrarchan love poetry has its true foundations in the material argue the poems: “ Such Order from Confusion sprung,/Such gaudy Tulips rais’d from Dung.” (“ The Lady’s Dressing Room”, Norton, 538). Interestingly, however, this is not the whole story. The couplet: “ His foul Imagination links/Each Dame he sees with all her Stinks” (“ The Lady’s Dressing Room”, Norton, 538) suggests a suspicion of naive empiricism. As does the advice to Strephon: “ On Sense and Wit your Passion found,/By Decency cemented round”, since, “ Beauty scarce endures a Day” (Norton, 547). The text insists that there is much beyond the realm of sense impressions. It becomes possible, therefore, to ask from which sense impression might an idea like “ decency” or “ sense” arise? Or, what is to prevent the sense impression “ stink” from being applied, by the individual subjected to it, to every example of the thing that originally stank? Indeed, this could be read as a challenge to even the

sophisticated empiricism of Locke: " Let anyone examine his own thoughts, and thoroughly search into his understanding, and then let him tell me, whether all the original ideas he has there, are any other than that of objects of his senses; or of the operations of his mind, considered as objects of his reflection". (35). It is not impossible to see how a particular interpretation of a passage such as this from Locke might support the view of empirical epistemology as inadequate. 5 So, within the same selection of poetry, and occasionally within the same poem, there emerges both a resistance to empiricism and the employment of that same empiricism to expose the falsity of other epistemological positions in this case the kind of airy idealism of Petrarchan love poetry. Exposing traditional poetic forms and tropes to empiricism brings two categories previously hermetically sealed from one another into close proximity, allowing each to contaminate the other, facilitating the process of explicitation. Of all Swift's texts, however, " The Tale of a Tub" takes up the most profoundly anti-empirical stance: He that can with Epicurus content his Ideas with the Films and images that fly off upon his Senses from the Superficies of things; Such a Man truly wise, creams off Nature, leaving the Sower and the Dregs, for Philosophy and Reason to lap up. This is the sublime and refined Point of felicity, called, the Possession of being well deceived; The Serene Peaceful State of being a Fool among Knaves. (Norton, 352). The ambivalence or incoherence of the narrator is dazzling, however: " and then comes Reason officiously, with Tools for cutting, and opening, and mangling, and piercing, offering to demonstrate, that they are not of the same consistence quite thro'. Now, I take all this to be the last Degree of perverting Nature; one of whose Eternal

Laws it is, to put her best Furniture forward.” (352). Two potentially antagonistic philosophical positions are juxtaposed in such a way that neither can emerge the victor. Such techniques in “The Tale of a Tub” have the effect of magnifying the visibility of both positions and forcing debate: “Many of Swift’s contemporaries saw clearly, as William Wotton did, that Swift’s satire returns against itself and demolishes the very position from which the attack was launched.. Swift had succeeded precisely in making visible and palpable what the age had only been able to contemplate negatively.” (Montag, 92). The snowballing momentum of the explicitation process is, perhaps, exemplified best in Wotton’s responses to “The Tale of a Tub” and Swift’s incorporation of them into the later version of his satire. Whether Wotton is right or wrong about Swift’s text being anti-Christian, a space is opened by both authors in which the debate can continue, further exposing what is implicit in Anglican thought to explicitation. In the assumption of the various philosophical and, particularly, epistemological positions I have begun to outline, Swift’s texts are entirely in tune with an age of radical change and flux. The writing is engaged in an enterprise of explicitation that is highly volatile and potentially fatal to entrenched positions including establishment Anglicanism. By opening these implicit positions to scrutiny the texts invite the kind of explicitation which allows the very establishment monotheism that many would argue Swift seeks to defend to crack and begin to disintegrate, thus hastening the progress of secularization that becomes an irresistible, if gradual, phenomenon in this period. Notes¹ Warren Montag points out that a continuing tendency in Swift criticism is to identify Swift with a firm philosophical/political position and,

particularly, to establish “ whether he was a Lockean liberal... (Ehrenpreis, Irvin. *Swift: The Man, his Works and the Age*. 3 vols. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962. 142; Downie, J. A. “ Swift’s Politics.” *Proceedings of the First Munster Symposium on Jonathan Swift*. Ed. J. Hermann and Heinz. J. Vienken. Munich: Fink, 1985), or a Tory authoritarian who saw society as an organic hierarchy (Lock, F. P. *Swift’s Tory Politics*. London: Duckworth, 1983; Kramnick, Isaac. *Bolingbroke and his Circle*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1968).” (1). 2 It is notoriously difficult to be certain of what Swift read. As William LeFanu notes: It is easier to define what books Swift owned than what he read. We know from the excellent indexes in Williams’s edition of Swift’s “ Correspondence” and by Irvin Ehrenpreis for Herbert Davis’s edition of the “ Prose Works” that more than a hundred authors were named or quoted by Swift. Some of these, the combatants in “ The Battle of the Books” for instance, were perhaps exemplary names rather than familiar reading, yet he certainly read many books which he never possessed. It has long been noticed that he had no edition of Shakespeare, yet could quote appositely from nine or ten of the plays. (3). Evidently, however, Swift had access to books other than his own. Sir William Temple’s collection at Moor Park would be one example. 3 The texts of Swift’s sermons, particularly “ On the Trinity”, document a deep mistrust of human reason: If they can pick out any one single Article in the Christian Religion which appears not agreeable to their own corrupted Reason, or to the Arguments of those bad People, who follow the Trade of seducing others, they presently conclude, that the Truth of the whole Gospel must sink along with that one Article. (Davis, 9: 159). The text emphasizes the dubious nature of human reason, warns of the

dangers inherent in reasoning from the particular to the general and posits scripture as the only “ real” truth. The text offers yet more positions on reason to be considered alongside the fable of the bee and the spider and the animal rationale/rationis capax (Norton, 585) opposition of Gulliver’s Travels. 4 Montag insists on a unified philosophical position in Swift. This consists of the defence of an “ Anglican Aristotelian world in which nothing exists without a divinely ordained end”. (87). Gassendi and Hobbes present problems for Swift “ because Aristotle’s cosmos...was ruled by first principles and ultimate ends and possessed a design that was prior to it, the Aristotelian system as a totality remained superior...to the Democritical systems associated with the ancient materialists and with Gassendi and Hobbes.” (63). Descartes, however, is threatening to Swift-as-churchman because: “ From the theoretical position occupied by Swift...only the pattern of human learning together with the understanding common to all men could support a search for truth, because this alone can correct the infirmities of any given individual. The cogito therefore was no foundation at all but the opening of an abyss.” (59). 5 Such a reading might derive its force from the “ Anglican rationalist” tradition that saw “ reason as a separate source of knowledge, superior to and independent of the senses”. (Harth, 146). Works Cited Corfield, Penelope. J. Rev. of A Land of Liberty? England 1689-1727, by Julian Hoppit. Times Literary Supplement 8 Dec. 2000: 11. Davis, Herbert. The Prose Works of Jonathan Swift. 14 vols. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1939-68. Greenberg, Robert. A., William. B. Piper, eds. The Writings of Jonathan Swift. New York: Norton, 1973. Hall, Basil. “ ‘ An Inverted Hypocrite’: Swift the Churchman”. The World of Jonathan Swift. Ed. Brian Vickers.

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